Handling Objections

"It's too expensive... I'm really happy with the people we use. ….We were really looking for a larger practice….. The people we use are only down the road…"

Objections like these amongst others, can for many professionals be real stumbling blocks to gaining new clients. There is no doubt that if you are adept at handling objections then you will garner more clients at higher average fees. In this article we will look at; why you should make the effort to learn how to handle objections, what they are and how to identify them early on, and some tried methods to with them.

The best objection I ever experienced from a potential client was shouted at me across their reception; 'Accountants, (*&$#%# accountants, I can't stand accountants. Get out!' You might be amazed that about two hours later I left with him as a new client, with all the paper work signed, he stayed with us for around nine years until he retired.

Why should you learn how to handle objections?

There is a myth that objections are hostile statements or an opposition to your proposal or idea. In many cases they are actually quite the reverse, representing, in fact, a buying signal. Take, as a simple example, 'I'm sorry but it's just too expensive'. This could and does quite often turn out to mean, 'I would love to use you, it's more than we are currently paying, can you help me with the fee a little'. So 'you're too expensive' is the buying signal. Evidently one reason you must learn how to handle objections is so excellent opportunities are not dismissed before fully forming.

Secondly it is undoubtedly true that none of your solutions for clients and potential clients are perfect. There will ALWAYS be one objection or another. In fact there is evidence to suggest that most people when buying professional services will throw in 4-5 substantial 'I want to think about it, it's too expensive, I want to check with my old advisors' style objections. The wonderful thing for you is that the majority of professionals simply give up when faced with these. If you learn how to tailor them productively, you will revive opportunities when everyone else has given up.

What are objections?

As we saw earlier they are often a buying signal. They can also be a cry for help or request for more information, for example 'I've heard a lot about LLPs and I'm sorry I don't think they are for us'. This is a clear buying signal and a request for clarification or more information. What they are actually saying is 'I'm interested enough in LLPs to have done some research, what are your thoughts?'

Objections can also be a sub-conscious attempt to slow the process down or take back control of the relationship, as in; 'I want to think about it or I need to go through this with my partners'.

We have found that very few objections are actually deal breakers. Most of them can be managed; the trick of course is to learn how to deal with them productively.

How to handle objections

Though seemingly trivial, the first step has to be to write down all the objections you commonly come across, consider how you are going to handle them, then learn how to handle them verbatim and following this they will not be an issue. Upon hearing new objections you will have learnt an array of techniques from which you should have some inspiration. I went through just such a list last week with one of our clients, it included; 'I want to think about it – I want to check with my co directors – I thought the Government were coming down hard on these tax schemes – Is this something my accountant should be looking at instead?'

Pre-empting objections.

Negate them before they come up. For example 'I need to check with my partners' is hard to deal with, so you need to make sure that you only try to close a deal when you are in front of the whole decision making unit. Knowing this should ensure that you engineer a sales process that enables you to always move towards meeting the whole decision making unit.

Pause Agree Question back. Very often there are two things you must initially try to do when faced with an objection, firstly; take the sting out of it, refuse to let it evolve into confrontation, welcome it, agree with it. Secondly; ensure you understand exactly what they have said, get them to clarify it and tell you exactly what they mean. Pause, Agree, Question back is a valued technique that forces you out of confrontation and into negotiation. You pause, allow silence to let them know you are taking it seriously; this stops you sounding too persistent and they might start explaining it, giving you time to think. Then you must agree or at least align yourself with them. The worst thing you can do is defend yourself or argue (remember 'yes but ' is the start of an argument). For example 'I think you're practice is too small for us --------- (pause)-------(align alongside) we certainly employ less people than your current advisors'---------- Then question them on their statement, 'it's interesting what you say can you expand on your thoughts some more please?'

There is a simple technique that I have seen used to replace Pause Agree Question, which is, after the pause simply feeding the objection straight back to the client in their own words in a questioning style. For example; "LLPs aren't for us" you feed straight back in a questioning style "LLPs aren't for you?" You will find that this will then draw out all their issues around the subject.

Isolate the real issue

We have found that Pause Agree Question is the most effective method for handling objections. The outcome is often a civilised discussion, where the client talks themselves out of the objection or at least completely clarifies it so that you know where you stand. Once you know what the real issue you can start to unpick it. Accurate clarification is essential to ensure you don't answer the wrong issue. For example what does 'your practice is too small' mean? It could mean, 'your insurance won't be enough, you don't have the specific expertise, you're not prestigious enough, you won't have the banking contacts, not international enough, no national coverage, I feel safer with a big firm'. Without clarifying exactly the issue, an answer or explanation may simply miss the point.

Techniques for answering objections

If you have isolated an objection and it still exists you must answer it and ensure that the client is happy with the answer. There are a variety of tricks and techniques, here are some examples. Whichever is chosen clearly depends on the circumstance and the objection itself.

Change the foundation of their decision, in effect you say to the client, 'what will you base your decision on, will it be the issue which is immovable or something else which we offer that you like'. For example the original objection might have been 'I'd prefer to use a more local firm', after discussing the issue through (PAQ) you establish that the drive time thing is a pain for them. However they have made it clear that your sector experience is valuable. So you could say something along the lines of 'So with this drive time to our office, which is more important to you? That we are further away or our sector experience?'

"What would you do in our position?" Getting people to answer their objection for you is great because they feel in control and it is truly consultative. The first time I came across it was with a lawyer who was visiting an ex-client who had left because the partner they had dealt with had been un-communicative slow and un-resourceful. In fact the client had ranted on a bit about it. That particular partner had left the practice. Later in the meeting the client and the new partner had been getting on well. So the partner I was with said 'out of interest, put yourself in our senior partners position, what would you have done if you'd had a some really good clients who felt they were being let down by a particular member of our team, just like you mentioned earlier?' The client told him he'd move the clients to someone else and re-train the partner involved. The partner facing him then said 'That's interesting, it's not exactly what we did, however the chap you were dealing with is no longer with our practice and I'm hear instead, do you think we get on well enough to give it a second chance?' The effect of such courage was profound the client just smiles and said 'that's more like it!'

There is no doubt that some professionals are far more advanced at business development than others. There is however a myth that some are born salespeople; the truth is they just embrace the process more readily than others.